The Washington Times

‘Modest goal’ set for Afghan war
Obama targets terrorists, forgoes nation-building

By Sean Lengell, August 1, 2010

The Obama administration and leading Democrats are dialing back expectations for the Afghanistan war, saying that their goal is to root out terrorists, not engage in a major nation-building project.

“Nobody thinks that Afghanistan is going to be a model Jeffersonian democracy,” Mr. Obama said during an interview broadcast on CBS’ “Sunday Morning” program.

“What we’re looking to do is difficult, very difficult, but it’s a fairly modest goal, which is, don’t allow terrorists to operate from this region; don’t allow them to create big training camps and to plan attacks against the U.S. homeland with impunity.”

Mr. Obama said his goals for Afghanistan can be accomplished.

“We can stabilize Afghanistan sufficiently and we can get enough cooperation from Pakistan that we are not magnifying the threat against the homeland,” he said. “If I didn’t think that it was important for our national security to finish the job in Afghanistan, then I would pull them all out today.”

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said the U.S. is “not there to take on a nationwide reconstruction or construction project in Afghanistan.”

Mr. Gates said in an appearance on ABC’s “This Week” program that the U.S. instead must focus “on those civilian aspects and governance that help us accomplish our security objective.”

“We are in Afghanistan because we were attacked from Afghanistan, not because we want to try and build a better society in Afghanistan,” he said.

“But doing things to improve governance, to improve development in Afghanistan, to the degree it contributes to our security mission and to the effectiveness of the Afghan government in the security arena, that’s what we’re going to do.”

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, when asked on “This Week” what the U.S. would to do protect Afghan women from brutal attacks by the Taliban, responded that the central U.S. mission in the country is “our own national security - to stop terrorism, to increase global security.”

The Washington Times

The California Democrat said that she and Congress are concerned that Afghan women and children receive proper health care and education, but "that can't happen without security" and the end of political corruption in the country.

Yet on Capitol Hill last week, 102 House Democrats voted against a war-spending bill - 70 more than did so last year - suggesting that Democrats are growing weary of the war.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin, Michigan Democrat, acknowledged that public support for the war has waned.

"They have the impression that things are not going well now, at least the majority" of the public, he said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union." "But I think the public does want us to succeed."

But Mr. Levin said that tangible progress is being made, particularly a strengthening Afghan army.

"It's a mixed picture. But the most important thing that is happening as far as I am concerned is that the Afghan army is well respected, is now going to be taking the lead," Mr. Levin said. "And these are very important words for the American public to understand."

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry said it would be wrong to force a modern, centralized form of government in Afghanistan.

"That would be a big mistake if that were the pattern we were trying to follow," the Massachusetts Democrat said Sunday on CNN's "Fareed Zakaria GPS" program. "And I don't believe that's what the administration is trying to do.

"I think the administration has a pretty good sense, darned good sense, as a matter of fact, of exactly how difficult it would be to create this centralized model. And they don't want that."

Mr. Kerry also said that it would be a mistake if only a "trivial" number of U.S. troops left Afghanistan leading up to July's deadline to start pulling out forces in Afghanistan, though he added that it would be "folly" for a mass exodus of troops next summer simply to meet an arbitrary deadline.

"The president is not going to suddenly pull the rug out from under the very efforts that we've all been engaged in over these years," he said.

Some U.S. allies aren't waiting. On Sunday, the Netherlands became the first NATO country to end its combat mission in Afghanistan, which had little domestic support there. Canada and Poland have announced planned withdrawal dates in 2011 and 2012, respectively.

The Washington Times

While the loss of about 1,900 Dutch troops likely won't be militarily significant, it is a political bellwether as doubts about the Afghanistan war continue to grow in Western countries, though NATO forces are starting what might be the war's decisive campaign.

A surge of mostly U.S. forces recently has taken over responsibility for key areas in Helmand and Kandahar provinces from British and Canadian forces and begun a more aggressive campaign against the Taliban in recent months that has led to increased casualties among Western militaries and Afghan civilians, as well as the Taliban enemy.

The fighting has provoked discontent from Afghan civilians, and more than 200 participated in a Sunday march in Kabul to protest a NATO rocket attack that they blamed for the deaths of more than 50 civilians. NATO disputes that accusation, saying a preliminary investigation shows at most three civilian deaths.

According to the Associated Press, protesters carried photos of dead and wounded children and shouted, "Death to America! Death to NATO!"

"We should not tolerate such attacks. The Americans are invaders who have occupied our country in the name of fighting terrorism," said 22-year-old Ahmad Jawed, a university student who also blamed the Afghan government. "We don't have a strong enough government to protect the rights of the Afghan people."

Meanwhile on Sunday, Mr. Gates said that the website WikiLeaks is morally guilty for releasing classified U.S. documents on the Afghanistan war, saying that he was "mortified" by the leak and its potential to harm U.S. troops and their Afghan allies.

Mr. Gates said that while the government is investigating the legal ramifications of the leaks, WikiLeaks also faces "moral culpability," a charge that he and uniformed military officials also made last week.

"And that's where I think the verdict is guilty on WikiLeaks," he said on ABC's "This Week." "They have put this out without any regard whatsoever for the consequences."

Mr. Gates said the information puts "those in Afghanistan who have helped us at risk. It puts our soldiers at risk because our adversaries can learn a lot about our techniques, tactics and procedures from the body of these leaked documents."

The secretary added that "protecting your sources is sacrosanct" in a war theater.

The Taliban has said it will use the documents to hunt down people who have cooperated with U.S. forces.

The Washington Times

WikiLeaks recently posted more than 75,000 secret U.S. military reports. Mr. Gates said the soldier accused of leaking the documents, who was working as an Army intelligence officer in Iraq, wouldn't have been able to do so if he weren't stationed in the field.

"Had whoever did this tried to do it at a rear headquarters overseas or pretty much anywhere in the U.S., we have controls in place that would've allowed us to detect it," he said.

Changes in intelligence gathering in recent years that have focused on putting "as much information in intelligence as far forward to the soldiers [in the field] as we possibly can" has created potential security-breach problems, Mr. Gates said.

But he said that while the Pentagon will review the policy, placing too many restrictions on access to classified intelligence could deny front-line troops critical information.

"My bias is against that," he said. "I want those kids out there to have all the information they can have."